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RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 0760  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000084

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MARR](#) [ASEC](#) [FJ](#)  
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE, FEBRUARY 1, 2007: EPG COMPLETES ITS  
VISIT; PRESIDENT ILOILO TO GO TO AUSTRALIA FOR MEDICAL  
TREATMENT; ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN JEOPARDY

REF: A. SUVA 80

[1](#)B. SUVA 75

Classified By: Charge Ted Mann per 1.5 (B) and (D)

#### Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) The EPG wrapped up its visit, but said little of substance in its closing press conference. The EPG will present a report to Forum Foreign Ministers in about two weeks. It called on the Forum to continue to engage with Fiji. In a welcome letter to the EPG Chairman, Bainimarama said the best form of engagement would be to remove all sanctions and travel bans and support his (five-year) plan to bring Fiji back to democracy. PM Qarase told EPG members that elections should be held within six months, as happened in 2001 when he headed the interim government. Australia will allow President Iloilo to travel there in mid-February for medical treatment. Intimidation efforts continue, including pressure on the University of the South Pacific to restrict academic freedom. End summary.

#### EPG Wraps Up Visit; Press Conference Reveals Little

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[1](#)2. (U) The Eminent Persons Group completed its meetings 2/01 after a visit to Lau to meet with deposed Prime Minister Qarase. In a brief press conference on the afternoon of 2/01, the EPG stated that it will be presenting a report to Forum Foreign Ministers in about two weeks. EPG members said the group had conducted consultations on a broad range of issues, including the constitution, good governance, and human rights abuses. The group said there is a consensus about the need to return to democracy, but noted there were many divergent views about when that could take place, with some suggesting elections within the year and others (read: the interim government) suggesting that a preparatory period of up to five years is needed. EPG members stressed the importance of continued Pacific Island Forum engagement with Fiji, not otherwise defined.

#### Qarase Says An Election Can be Held in Six Months

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[1](#)3. (U) In press interviews after his meeting, Qarase said he told the EPG that elections need to be held at the earliest possible date. Qarase noted that when he led the interim government in 2000 he arranged elections within six months. There is no reason why that couldn't happen again. Bainimarama's plan for interim government rule of 3-5 years is "totally unsatisfactory," he said. Qarase told the EPG his "internal exile" in Lau was a violation of basic human

rights.

#### Bainimarama Letter to EPG

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14. (C) Embassy obtained from the Australian High Commission a copy of a welcome letter Bainimarama wrote to the EPG Chairman, dated 1/29. In the letter, Bainimarama reviewed: 1) the reasons why the military overthrew the elected government; 2) the mandate of the current interim government; 3) steps to be taken before Fiji can return to democracy; and 4) ways the Pacific Island Forum and its members could help assist Fiji restore democracy. Sections 1-2 of the letter contain little new information. They consist of a regurgitation of statements made by Bainimarama since the coup. The focus in section 3 is the need for a census and other activities to ensure a fair election, including a boundaries commission, a voter education drive and election office capacity building.

#### Bainimarama Calls on the Forum to Understand and Assist

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15. (C) Section 4 of Bainimarama's letter, in essence, calls on Forum members to embrace the coup and help the interim government carry out its program. It asks the Forum and its members to take the following steps:

--All Forum members re-engage with Fiji to better understand Fiji's situation;

--Australia and New Zealand gradually remove sanctions, starting immediately with removal of the travel ban on military personnel, interim ministers, civil servants and civilians;

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--Australia and New Zealand resume development assistance to Fiji;

--The Forum and its members support Fiji's reinstatement in the Commonwealth;

--Australia and New Zealand consider a package of assistance to facilitate accomplishment of the milestones specified in the interim government's roadmap for the restoration of democracy (presumably section 3 above); and

--The EPG and the Forum Foreign Ministers support the attempt of the interim government to return the country to parliamentary democracy through the processes mandated (by the interim government). Similar support for the interim government's attempt to clean up corruption would be appreciated.

#### War of Words with NZ Continues

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16. (U) New Zealand Foreign Minister Peters called on Bainimarama 1/30 to "stand down" and run for office if he really believes the people of Fiji are behind him. Peters said Bainimarama should back up with evidence his claims of widespread corruption as a basis for the coup. He also strongly criticized the many human rights violations perpetrated by the military, saying it had "created a climate of fear and abuse." Bainimarama lashed back 1/31, saying that Peters "should stop spitting venom and leave this country alone." "Who is he to interfere in our affairs. We will not be pushed around by people who think they are too smart." Bainimarama said Peters and PM Clark "should try to map out a way to end the bitterness between New Zealand and Fiji."

#### Australia Agrees to Visit by Iloilo For Medical Treatment

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17. (C) Contacts at the Australian High Commission tell us President Iloilo will be allowed to travel to Australia in mid-February for a planned medical check-up and treatment.

Iloilo remains on Australia's list of banned travelers; however, an exemption has been granted for "humanitarian reasons." The High Commission contact said refusing to give Iloilo medical treatment had such a large potential downside that granting the exemption was "the obvious thing to do."

#### USP Head Gets Threatening Call from RFMF

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¶18. (C) Last week University of South Pacific Vice Chancellor Anthony Tarr wrote a memo to USP faculty saying that while he wants faculty to "use their heads" before speaking up, he and the administration will always support academic freedom and the right of faculty to express their views. We hear Tarr received a threatening phone call from the RFMF earlier this week in response. (Comment: Since USP is a regional institution, we hope Forum member countries take notice. End comment.)

#### Assistant Commissioner for Police Operations Released; Placed on Indefinite Leave

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¶19. (C) Assistant Commissioner Samueli Matakibau, who described for us the precarious state of military-police coexistence in ref B, was released February 1 after 4 days in military custody. Press reports indicate that the RFMF had located rifles in the residences of police officers in Matakibau's unit. The RFMF has been extremely concerned about the existence of any weapons not under its control. Matakibau was sent on "indefinite leave."

#### Bainimarama Meets with Some NGOs, Others Still on the Run

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¶10. (U) Commander Bainimarama met with representatives of 16 NGOs 1/30 for "informal discussions." By all accounts the discussion was somewhat one-sided. According to an interim government press release, Bainimarama told the NGOs that some of their public comments had brought discomfort and hardened feelings, and this was not helping the situation. He told them the government was listening to NGO concerns and that "at an appropriate time" their views would be taken into account. "Meanwhile you have to cooperate with us fully, so that peace and calm which we have worked very hard to maintain continue to be maintained and enjoyed by the masses of people."

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¶11. (C) Several NGOs met with the EPG. We understand they reviewed the many human rights violations that have taken place since the coup and described the climate of fear that currently exists in Fiji. One NGO activist who couldn't make her appointment with the EPG was Angie Heffernan, head of the Pacific Center for Public Integrity. Heffernan told us she was interviewed by the police in Sigatoka (in Fiji's west) earlier in the week, and then released. She later received a call from her brother, a military officer, who told her the military was still trying to catch her. She remains in hiding at an undisclosed location.